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COMMENTARY

Serious or not on Iraq war?

That's the choice, not run vs. stay. And if we are, we need a national debate on sacrifices required.

By James Russell

The midterm elections were only the latest occasion for Americans to listen to shop-worn variants of the "cut and run" or "stay the course" sound bites describing our choices in Iraq. All such characterizations are wrong. The real choice facing us is to decide how seriously we take the war.

Most observers would rightly conclude that up until now the United States remains uncommitted to the fight. Less than 13 percent of our 1.4 million active-duty military are deployed in Iraq. Fewer than 15,000 of the 150,000 troops in Iraq today are actually engaged in combat operations.

The insurgents and the death-squad militias in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan have figured this out. While not 10-feet tall, this loose collection of groups is resilient, adaptive and tenacious, and the insurgents are fighting on their home turf. How else is it that a series of street thugs and gangs armed with AK-47s, RPGs and cell phones are pushing around the world's preeminent global power?

The surrounding states have also figured this out and are hedging their bets against what looks like the inevitable attempt to craft politically acceptable circumstances that will give us "peace with honor" and the withdrawal of American forces.

Our adversaries and our erstwhile allies see a nation that refuses to place itself on a "war" footing. They see a nation of people who spend most of their time in movie theaters and at shopping malls. Our enemies are right to conclude that they are more committed to the fight than us.

If we want to rescue any favorable outcome in Iraq, the nation must decide whether or not to commit itself to the fight. This should be the starting point for the Baker Commission and the other groups examining courses of action in Iraq. Being at war and committing the nation to achieving its objectives in Iraq means shared sacrifice and service, and may mean - gasp - higher taxes. It means getting serious about the nonsensical way our military is organized and funded, wrenching these hidebound bureaucracies away from their Cold War mentality. Perhaps most importantly, it means engaging the American people in a national debate about the real human and monetary costs that are entailed in rescuing success in Iraq.

Iraq has become a "slow bleed," in which American blood, prestige and credibility are all slowly and inexorably being spilled in ever increasing quantities.

Neither political party appears to know how to stop the hemorrhage. Neither party displays any interest in forming a unified front to address the slow-motion disaster. For all the talk of Iraq's flawed constitution, fractured government structures and ineffective president, perhaps it's the United States that doesn't realize the gravity of the situation and the crying need for a national unity government of its own.

Iraq is a strategic problem that requires a strategic solution - a solution that blends mutually supportive steps on the domestic and international fronts to bring a truly coordinated response to the crisis. Another series of missed ultimatums or deadlines foisted on a hapless Iraqi government won't cut it.

As a first step, it's time for us to acknowledge that the American center of gravity in Iraq lies not in Baghdad or in Anbar province, but here in the United States. If our political leaders would prefer to continue having foreign debtors finance the war rather than ask the American people to open their wallets, maybe we have no business remaining in Iraq. This has been the default approach of both political parties, and it's just plain wrong.

The situation cries out for elected officials to do what they were elected to do: lead. Honestly explaining the real costs and the stakes for the United States in Iraq is a good place to start. And the results of the midterm elections provide an opportunity to forge a national consensus.

Could anyone argue with a partnership of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Harry Reid and President Bush that formed an effective unity government to bring all instruments of national power to bear on Iraq? Does anyone believe that Mideast states would remain on the sidelines hedging their bets if they were confronted by a U.S. government they knew was finally serious about solving the Iraq problem?

The current "slow bleed" is the worst possible place to be - a place that will inevitably lead to our ignominious retreat. It's

time for our leadership to take this issue to the people and collectively decide how serious we really are about the war. Once we address that issue, we can decide whether to make the necessary commitments of national resources that can make "success" more than just a sound bite.

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